

Thesis abstract

Outsourcing responsibility. Towards a transformative politics of domestic work

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Abstract of a thesis for a Doctorate of Philosophy submitted to the Australian Catholic University, North Sydney, Australia

In this doctoral thesis, I start from the body of feminist scholarship on “outsourcing” domestic and care work in the global North. I maintain that this debate has importantly highlighted the interactions of gender with class, race, and ethnicity. In its almost exclusive focus on differently situated women, however, the debate tends to reproduce the organization and performance of reproductive work as a “woman’s issue,” simultaneously shrouding men’s positions therein. Via an in-depth empirical study, I conducted with five domestic work outsourcing, opposite-sex couples in Vienna, Austria, I seek to bring to the fore the affective relations and corporeal practices of responsiveness and non-responsiveness between the outsourcing partners, and their positioning vis-à-vis migrant domestic workers. Using a relational concept of responsibility, I argue that responsiveness to human interconnectedness is required for responsible practices to emerge. I critique the notion of the supposedly “self-sufficient” autonomous individual, and draw on feminist care ethics, to highlight the existing relationality and interdependence among the various actors. I position my project against the positivist paradigm and bring empirical and theoretical material into a conversation at eye level.

First, I trace the reproduction and maintenance of unjust structures within the field of outsourcing in concrete, everyday, social interaction in order to emphasize their social nature and changeability. I strive for a systemic portrayal of non-responsive practices as shaped by an epistemology of ignorance, rather than accidental “failures,” and thus critique asymmetrical structures, not individual “character flaws.” Second, I want to identify existing potentials for transformation in regards to the structurally vulnerable position of migrant domestic workers. I highlight potentials for transformation towards social justice that are there and should be amplified. These consist of feelings of guilt, which I here read as affective “spill-over” that cannot be contained within the narrative of autonomous, independent individuals on the one hand; and on the other hand, practices of responsiveness, and the potential for creative embodied, (affective and relational) performances.

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